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## Where next for parks? A response

**A recent Leisure Review round table considered the future for parks and identified some challenges if the parks sector is to thrive in an age of austerity. This debate prompted a response from Sid Sullivan on behalf of the Parks Alliance, the group campaigning on behalf of parks and open spaces across the UK.**

The Parks Alliance was most interested to read your write-up following the round table, 'Where next for parks?' This is of course a vital and critical question for the sector and our wide spectrum of collaborating agencies as we develop a 'voice' with which to engage with government about the future of this vital service. Thus the rationale for the creation of the Parks Alliance (a collaborative term that embraces all of the ground care, horticultural, landscape, leisure management and stakeholder roles) is succinctly expressed. Your discussion touched on many of the dilemmas and possibilities for the sector, and indeed some of the empirical evidence that underpins the contribution that parks make to the UK's economy, health and wellbeing, and community cohesion. Indeed, the available scientific evidence was validated in IFPRA's 2013 report Benefits of Urban Parks, A Systematic Review [note 1], which, in this context, is considered to be the gold standard.

What is more taxing, however, is the issue of what action or actions are required to overcome the dire funding of parks and to recognise the contribution that they make to the increasingly busy and noisy urban environment, improving the nation's health and wellbeing and local neighbourhood environments. With the emergence of the Parks Alliance, the sector now has a collective voice and representative partnership that will engage with government, national and local so as to work with them to restore some sanity to the current underfunding and the continuing disproportionate cuts to spending on all types of parks, whether local or strategic.

With the continuance of austerity budgeting and an apparent notion that it is possible to close the door on a park, as might be the case with a library, with the consequences hidden from view, there was never a more apposite moment to agree that in order to save our parks the campaign will not be successful without providing evidence of value. The parks industry needs to be better at describing their contribution in terms of sport, health, the environment and value to property. For example, and in the context of sport and children's play, the Olympic charter asserts that "the practice of sport is a human right" and the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child 1959, Principle 7 states, "the child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation". To find our parks and sports grounds once again threatened by abject under-funding is disconcerting. From these 'rights' it surely follows that it is reasonable to infer that the provision of places for play, sport, and recreation (they are called parks) are part of those same rights that governments have a responsibility to protect with adequate provision and proper funding.

These are pivotal policies for wellbeing and obesity reduction. It is illogical for them to be regarded as optional additions to these responsibilities. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the benefits of prevention of obesity in the under-fives can last for many years. Recent research found that if a healthy weight can be maintained until the age of five these youngsters were four times less likely to develop obesity as a teenager [NEJM, doi.org/q9n; note2]. What more evidence do we need to justify the benefits of well-designed and well-maintained parks

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and sports areas? What greater testament is there to the skills and dedication of those countless ground care and horticultural professionals who contribute to such a positive environment benefit for the whole community?

That is why the Parks Alliance is focused on changing the debate from the cost of parks to the value of parks, their contribution to government policy and their ability to mitigate an increasingly noisy and potentially unhealthy urban lifestyle. This debate also needs to embrace alternative ways of managing parks and of raising funds to ensure that they are properly maintained and valued. To achieve those ends we have to engage with government and in this context we are currently seeking the name of the government minister with responsibility for parks so that we might work with them collaboratively to redress the issue of funding and the quality of parks more generally. Our explicit purpose is to provide that much needed interface between government and the sector for this vital public service.

However, there is also some very positive news from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Their report on the state of UK parks, due out shortly, will be a much-welcomed stocktake for those that support parks and will hopefully provide essential objective assessment of the state of the UK's parks and their medium- to long-term viability, thus adding to the IFPRA evidence.

The Parks Alliance will continue its efforts to build a sustainable representative voice and presence for UK parks to represent concerns to government. We are very pleased with the support of individuals and organisations to date, support that is helping us to build the robustness of our arguments against further budgetary cuts. We very much look forward to working together in 2014 to create a lasting legacy and services that will provide that much needed space and solace from an ever-growing noisy and fast-paced urban existence.

**Dr Sid Sullivan is a member of the transitional board of the Parks Alliance. The Parks Alliance welcome views and comments to [theboard@theparksalliance.org](mailto:theboard@theparksalliance.org)**

Notes:

1. Benefits of Urban Parks, A Systematic Review, IFPRA 2013
2. Incidence of Childhood Obesity in the United States, The New England Journal of Medicine, January 2014

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